Praxis: A Writing Center Journal • Vol 10, No 2 (2013)

REVISING TRIMBUR'S DICHOTOMY: TUTORS AND CLIENTS SHARING KNOWLEDGE, SHARING POWER

Leanne Michelle Moore
Abilene Christian University
lmm10b@acu.edu

In the twenty-five years since John Trimbur's 1987 article, "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" was published, writing center personnel have found it necessary to emphasize the dichotomy in the term "peer tutor." Trimbur's influential article has continually appeared in the literature used to train tutors and introduce them to writing center theory. For example, *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* (1998) and *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Praxis* (2008) both include Trimbur's article. It is also cited in three essays collected in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*: Cynthia Haynes-Burton's ""Thirty-something' Students: Concerning Transitions in the Writing Center," originally published in 1990, Jay Jacoby's ""The Use of Force': Medical Ethics and Center Practice," and Julie Bokser's "Peer Tutoring and Gorgias: Acknowledging Aggression in the Writing Center," originally published in 2001. Each of the articles within *The St. Martin's Sourcebook* takes Trimbur's assertion of the peer-tutor dichotomy as fundamentally true. Training, then, has focused on the task of switching deftly between peer and tutor during a session because it is believed that tutors cannot inhabit both roles simultaneously. Trimbur points out that many tutors feel a loyalty to both the institution that has awarded them the label of "writing expert" as well as to their own peers who share their concerns as students (290-291). Beginning tutors especially will feel pressure from both sides, wanting to please the institution (by passing down knowledge) and their clients (by being co-learners). His solution is to help tutors learn to negotiate conflicting social allegiances through a sequential training module. Toward the end of his article, he worries that "the conception of tutoring as an apprenticeship treats students as extensions of our profession and can reinforce their dependence on faculty authority " (295). To avoid this situation, Trimbur advocates a developmental tutor training program that would begin by emphasizing the tutor's role as co-learner in order to de-emphasize the tutor's belief in the traditional academic paradigm of passing down knowledge from expert to novice.

Trimbur asserts that tutors feel cognitive dissonance in their roles in the writing center, "pulled, on one hand, by their loyalty to their fellow students and, on the other hand, by loyalty to the academic system that has rewarded them and whose values they have internalized" (290). He is especially concerned that focus on tutors' expertise, demonstrated in advanced courses in writing theory and pedagogy, will "reinforce their dependence on faculty authority" (295). Trimbur's solution is to train tutors not to shift roles but rather to negotiate social allegiances, and, as a result, his training method is characterized by an emphasis on the power dynamic between tutor and client (292).

I disagree with Trimbur. Where he maintains that peer tutors must negotiate power dynamics at all times during a writing center session, I would argue that the consideration of power is not a necessary condition for a full and free exchange of ideas. While both Trimbur and I agree that the tutor/peer dichotomy should not play a role in a given session, Trimbur believes this is because training programs should teach tutors how to be a co-learner, not a tutor. He suggests that "expertise in teaching writing is not so much dangerous as it is premature because it takes peer tutors out of student culture, the social medium of co-learning" (Trimbur 294). I, conversely, believe a training program that teaches tutors writing pedagogy or otherwise emphasizes expertise can only increase the effectiveness of writing center sessions. Contrary to Trimbur, I argue that expertise improves the effectiveness of the rhetorical choices that can be made in a writing center session, and that it does so without collapsing the co-learning environment that is essential to any writing center.

The problem with the kind of training Trimbur suggests is that it inhibits tutors' ability to provide both the nondirective and directive aid that writing centers profess to provide. Trimbur's emphasis on the conflict between the words "peer" and "tutor" sets up false expectations for the writing center experience: it either discourages the tutor from sharing crucial expertise or discourages the client from coming to his or her own conclusions about the paper. If writing center personnel try to act as a tutor, they risk taking ownership of another's paper; if they try to act as peer, they risk letting teachable moments slip by. The writing tutor can and should strive to simultaneously inhabit both the peer and tutor realms, a stance which allows the tutor to provide the right kind of aid to writers—aid which both speak and listens. Although knowledge is certainly power, the maxim does not

carry over into the writing center session in deleterious ways between tutor and client because both are students. Their shared social status in the university context allows for a knowledge swap, so to speak, without swapping power along with it.

An experience I had with language learning serves as a useful illustration of the kind of fluid knowledge sharing and stable power dynamics I am advocating. Several years ago, I committed two years to working in the Peace Corps in Nicaragua. Because I would be living in a foreign context rather than merely traveling through the country for a short duration, I was understandably invested in learning a second language. In that sense, I was like the first-year student who has committed herself to academia for several years but knows she does not understand what teachers expect for her first college paper; like that student, I recognized I needed help. While student writers will have had high school training, it is often the case with first-year students that their previous training is sometimes insufficient for the demands of college writing. Similarly, I also had previous language training, but it was not adequate to meet the demands for the higher language level I needed. Thus, I sought out the teacher of English as a foreign language in the local high school and entreated her to help me practice Spanish, much as a student would seek out the university's writing center. In return for helping me with my language needs, I helped the teacher practice English. I brought her questions about what I had heard and didn't understand during the week, and she asked me questions about the English in her textbooks. We spent about half our tutoring time speaking in Spanish and the other half speaking in English. Through reciprocal tutoring sessions, speaking and questioning in both our languages, we served each other as both peer and tutor.

Several years later, while tutoring at the Abilene Christian University writing center, I began to make connections between the language learning I had undertaken in Nicaragua and my writing tutoring in a more formal context. At first it might seem that any comparison between these two situations was forced. After all, in the writing center I was an employee of the University, which lent me formal investiture of my writing expertise. Students presumably saw me as someone with a certain amount of authority over them and their writing—someone who held the answers. Furthermore, students ostensibly came to hear what I had to say about their paper rather than to share anything with me. Or at least that is what Trimbur fears. Indeed, this is the sort of attitude that Trimbur says short-circuits the dynamics of collaboration, the sort that situates the writing tutor as expert only and ignores the nuances of her status as peer.

On closer inspection, however, I began to wonder if these assumptions are really true of writing center sessions. Do students come to writing centers unwilling to discuss their papers? Do they really want someone to simply fix their mistakes and say no more about it? Certainly some do. Some new clients may not understand what the writing center is about, and they may be unaware that the tutors are also students with professors of their own. As a result, students who do not recognize the nuance of the tutors' status may place themselves in a position of subservience to the tutors' perceived power. But I have found that the majority of returning clients want something different, something I found while learning another language. The more I tutored clients, the more I began to notice the ways in which my experience abroad had changed my view of the writing center session. In my language tutoring, I was a peer and a tutor at the same time without experiencing any contradictions between the two personas. My friend and I were both "experts" in our own fields—Spanish and English, respectively. Both of us appreciated the knowledge offered by the other, but neither felt superior because of the knowledge we were able to provide. We were simply having a conversation in which both sides contributed equally; neither assumed power over the other when sharing new information.

This is what happens in the best writing center sessions, those that produce better writers, not just better writing (North 76). This is also what happens, as Kenneth Bruffee notes in his article, "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" in the simultaneous peer/tutor role. He asserts that knowledge is a "social artifact" created by communities and that learning happens when people collaborate, much as they do in a writing center session. Bruffee argues, for example, that "Knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation" (214). If that is true, then it is ineffectual to try and separate or negotiate the expert and peer roles. That is, if we agree that knowledge is created among peers, then one *cannot* separate expertise from equal status. And indeed, we can observe this kind of peer tutoring in many different situations even outside of writing centers. Bruffee notes that in fields such as business, medicine, law, and engineering, colleagues teaching colleagues is the norm. Educated people are teaching and learning alongside other educated people without encountering the power struggle that Trimbur fears will undermine the writing session.

Unfortunately, when trainers emphasize the peer persona in their tutors and downplay the tutor persona in response to that fear, it limits sessions' potential by preventing the tutor from being able to make choices about when to be direct or indirect or other theory-based decisions during the session. Eric Sentell, in his article "Caught Between a Teacher and a Tutor," highlights how limiting a position attempting to be a peer and not a tutor can be. He found himself caught in the unenviable position of having to choose between his peer self and his tutor self during several sessions with a student. The client's professor seemed to look only for the errors in the student's paper, while Sentell understood the intentional rhetoric of the essay. But as a tutor, Sentell was forced to choose between encouraging the client to write what he wanted to say and advising him to write merely what the evaluator wanted to read. Neither option provided an ideal solution. In the end, Sentell observed, "Perhaps the best option [for effective tutoring] is to break out of limiting dichotomies: assimilation vs. resistance, instructor authority vs. student authority, product vs. person" (13). He might well have included peer vs. tutor in his list. The co-production of knowledge that Bruffee calls the "conversation of mankind" had to be abandoned so that Sentell could fulfill either the peer or tutor role.

As Sentell suggests, more effective conversations will happen when tutors have the freedom to see themselves as equals sharing power with their clients. Tutors must "break out of limiting dichotomies" in order to see themselves as peers who are tutoring or tutors who also inhabit the role of peers. Let me illustrate a bit further. As a writing tutor, I am in just the right position to help students the way a writing center should (increasing clients' level of rhetorical effectiveness) since I am not their teacher, but rather their peer. But I have been trained in giving feedback, so I can serve as an informed peer. In my capacity as writing center tutor, just as in my language learning experience, I do not feel that I have to negotiate those two roles. Students using the writing center can expect, to use Peter Elbow's term, an *ally reader*—the reciprocity of friendship on a professional level (*On Writing*). They are free to explain what they mean, to express their writing insecurities, to know what they're doing right. More than once, I have seen a look of relief cross students' faces when they learned that they were not about to hear a list of everything wrong with the paper. Students become more animated and invested in the session when I ask them to have a conversation with me. Certainly, by the end of the session they still hope to have the makings of a better paper, but their improvement is the result of a conversation with an informed and invested professional friend, not through a sort of informal teacher-student conference. Tutor and client have created both the knowledge and the power together.

In an article published in the November/December 2011 issue of *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, authors Rita Malenczyk and Lauren Rosenberg do, in fact, see the roles of peer and tutor as non-contradictory and celebrate the unique position of the writing center tutor. In their piece, "Dialogic for 'Their Own Ends': Increasing the Pedagogical Independence of Peer Tutors in the Writing Center and the First-Year Writing Classroom," they write:

> While our tutors, then, certainly serve the needs of faculty and support the courses we teach, they are also—and perhaps more importantly—autonomous agents who are thinking about learning in different ways from [faculty]. Because of their hybrid role as mentors and students, tutors are able to make connections with students from both of those identities . . . Because they stand, to paraphrase Muriel Harris, in a middle place, they are particularly aware of the complexities and implications of the discourse negotiations they arrange. (7, 8)

The program Malenczyk and Rosenberg have developed at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU) attempts to give tutors more independence as writing specialists in their own right, endowing them with more ethos as experts. As a part of their writing program, they gather classroom writing teachers together for workshops four times a year, to which writing center tutors are also invited. Together, professors and tutors discuss writing issues pertinent to the classroom. Malenczyk and Rosenberg's inclusion of these tutors in faculty workshops is an important acknowledgement that peer tutoring is not the "blind leading the blind," since selected tutors are, in fact, peers with a certain amount of writing expertise to offer to their clients (and, as Malenczyk and Rosenberg suggest, to the faculty).

And yet, part of the reason the tutors' participation in faculty workshops is so helpful is that tutors are, at the same time, students who can contribute information about student culture to the faculty. Malenczyk and Rosenberg understand the richness that both roles bring to the writing center. By bringing faculty and tutors together for mutually edifying discussions, they hope to cultivate both the expert and peer personas within the tutors. Similarly, an important characteristic of these workshops is that they place faculty in the position of student and tutors in the position of teacher. Certainly we would agree that faculty have more knowledge, experience, and

power than the tutors, yet, during these workshops, teachers become the recipients of the tutors' knowledge and unique observations about composition issues.

If these interactions can happen between faculty and students, then why should they not also occur during writing center sessions? I believe interactions like those at ECSU can happen in the writing center, with each participant both sharing knowledge and being a co-learner (someone who walks alongside another as he or she reaches new ideas and conclusions). To do this, however, requires re-thinking Trimbur's dichotomy. This is where Malenczyk and Rosenberg's argument falls short. The authors have implicitly accepted the idea that tutors are obligated both to the institution and to the student body, and that, in reality, tutors hold power that threatens to sabotage what the writing center does. However, a writing center session, at its core, is simply a time when two writers can talk together about their writing. As Kenneth Bruffee argued so well in his 1984 article, "[w]hat peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit, or least of all proofread. What they do together is converse" (213). If this is really true, then the most important part of a writing center session is the interaction between the student and the tutor, not the subtext of the interaction between the tutor and the university or between the tutor and the rest of the student body. Certainly, those kinds of subtexts pose challenges for a university writing center, but they are distractions from its real work. The real work of the writing center is to promote conversations and empowerment between equals—an informed tutor and client.

Trimbur does not disagree that tutors and clients can create knowledge together outside of an institutional hierarchy. He does, after all, quote Bruffee when he notes that "peer tutoring replaces the hierarchical model of teachers and students with a collaborative model of co-learners engaged in the shared activity of intellectual work" (Trimbur 290). But when Trimbur proposes to train tutors to be peers rather than experts, even at the beginning stages, it problematizes the very mission of a writing center. Certainly, tutors must be peers and co-learners so that clients retain ownership of their papers; but to neglect writing expertise during training is to "short-circuit," to use Trimbur's language, the task of creating better writers.

A peer tutor possesses two fluid personas that are advantageous to the goals of the writing center. Since clients visit the writing center seeking the benefits of interacting with a peer who can also tutor, tutor trainers would do well to embrace the confluence of the two roles rather than to impose artificial dichotomies on them. While Malenczyk and Rosenberg are right to avoid downplaying the tutor's expertise, they hold on to the idea that peer tutoring involves negotiating two dichotomous roles. I would argue, however, that a successful tutor is, in fact, one who combines aspects of both a peer and a tutor. Rather than focusing on the negotiation between conflicting roles, then, tutor training should focus on developing the singular role of informed peer or professional friend—a role akin to Elbow's concept of the "ally reader." In this way, tutors can be prepared to provide nondirective or directive tutoring depending upon the client's needs. Tutors can encounter each client as an individual person with unique needs and respond accordingly, rather than limit themselves to being either a peer or a tutor. A tutor who has the expertise to implement the best writing center methodologies and yet is a peer of writing center clients can provide a non-threatening session in which the clients' writing improves and the client herself becomes a better writer. Knowledge can be created through collaboration between two people who share power.

Trimbur's assertion that tutors must negotiate conflicting roles, I would argue, places an unnecessary hardship on both trainers and tutors. As Trimbur rightly suggested, when trainers situate the session in a paradigm that pits tutor and peer against one another, the needs of the clients suffer. This does not mean, however, that tutors can best meet clients' needs by minimizing their role as experts. Rather, if writing tutors see themselves as *both* experts *and* peers, the clients' needs come to the forefront. When that happens, tutors find the freedom to help clients through dialogue, and clients leave having become more prepared and better-equipped writers.

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